

Europe's framework research

# Commission ready to pull out communal rug?

Brussels

THE European Commission could go so far as to drop the whole \$8,000 million, 'framework five-year programme for European research and development' next month, if governments fail to agree to support the programme at a sufficiently high level. So observers were saying in Brussels last week, as the Commission began to field its strongest political musclemen, Commission President Jacques Delors and his team, in favour of what the Commission considers a sensible budget for the research programme.

Last week, the European Parliament's Energy, Research and Technology Committee voted to advise the Commission to withdraw the framework programme if the full budget requested — a reduction compared with the \$10,000 million earlier requested and a "minimum" according to the committee — was not accepted.

Certainly research, which at the full amount of the framework programme would account for little more than a twentieth of Brussels spending, is now at the centre of Brussels politics, where it is feeling the full blasts of European summitry. The Commission wishes through research to confirm a new role for itself in the industrial regeneration of Europe. France, West Germany and the United Kingdom have been resisting both for financial reasons and, undoubtedly, because of the interference in national science and technology programmes that increased Commission activity would imply.

In fact, governments have accepted the principle of a major European program-

me of research and development coordinated by the Commission in the 'Single Act', the major treaty of union agreed by heads of state last year in Luxembourg and due to be voted in place by all members of the European Communities by the end of this year. The Single Act includes a place for the framework programme for research, and Delors sees the voting and proper financing of that programme to be a clear test of the 'New Europe'. He told British industrialists recently that European Communities research and development policy was "so relevant and so essential" because in the long term it bore directly on the creation of a single European market for European goods.

The framework amounts to less than 2 per cent of overall research and development in Community countries and "we are not, repeat not, out to enter into some kind of competition with the member states", Delors said. "We hear references to cost-effectiveness. But the microchip industry people tell us that their return on ESPRIT programmes is 400 per cent despite the cost of cooperation. We are said to be bureaucratic. But do people know that it takes two European officials to manage £1 million of research and development funds, and eight officials in the most efficient member states? Industrialists, and researchers, and academics are turning to us, to Europe, and saying they are ready to work together... I do not see why the most solemn undertakings by the heads of state and government [in the Single Act] are not being put into effect faster." **Robert Walgate**

UK research appointments

# Council breaks new ground

THE terms on which the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) has made three senior appointments to its staff have occasioned some surprise among British academics.

Interest centres particularly on the arrangements under which the three directors of science appointed in the past twelve months have been promised that, if their five-year terms are not renewed, they will be kept on the payroll at a professional level.

The three appointments were foreseen in NERC's corporate plan, published nearly two years ago. The objective was that NERC's spending in three areas (Earth science, marine science and terrestrial and freshwater ecology) spanning its whole range of interests should be overseen by scientists of individual distinction. When the new arrangements were announced, some directors of NERC institutes expressed misgivings on the ground that their independence would be compromised and their access to the NERC council impeded.

The first appointment, of Dr P.B.H. Tinker (terrestrial and freshwater ecology) was made last December. Dr J.D. Woods (marine science), previously at the Kiel institute of oceanography, and Dr J.C. Briden, previously professor of geology at the University of Leeds, were appointed in the summer of this year.

As part of the arrangement with the holders of the three posts, it has been agreed that they should remain active in research, for which reason it is intended that they should maintain modest research programmes at suitable academic institutions (All three have plumped for the University of Oxford, within driving distance of NERC's Swindon headquarters.) Dr J.C. Bowman, secretary of NERC, says on the telephone that the council of NERC has agreed that sums "of the order of 100K [£100,000]", taken from the budgets of the three directorates, should be used to support this research.

On NERC's promise of continued employment, Bowman says that the arrangements do not differ from those governing the appointment of scientists elsewhere in the council's network, who are normally offered employment until retirement age. Moreover, he says that the arrangements are not inconsistent with the British Treasury's rules on public appointments, but merely a "new wrinkle" on them.

Tinker will be 60, the normal retirement age from the public service, when his five-year appointment ends, but both Woods and Briden (now 47) will have some years to go. **John Maddox**

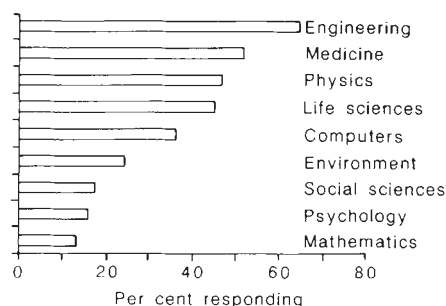
# US universities appear in good shape

Washington

CONSTRUCTION in progress and planned over the next five years will increase research space at US research universities by between 14 and 26 per cent, according to a survey\* by the National Science Foundation, at a cost of \$7,500 million.

The survey covered all doctorate-granting institutions, and showed that the top 50 in terms of research and development spending (out of a total of 165) accounted for more than 50 per cent of work in progress and 60 per cent of planned work. Engineering, medical sciences and physical sciences departments were more likely to have construction in progress than others (see figure).

The survey produced one surprise for the doomsayers on university research



facilities: over half of the same top 50 universities reported the condition of their research facilities as "good" or "excellent".

But of those ranked outside the top 50, over half replied "fair" or "poor". □

\*Science and Engineering Research Facilities at Doctorate-granting Institutions. National Science Foundation, 1986.